Early Irish Garb Ensemble

Kingdom A&S Pentathalon 2017

Lady Siobhán an Einigh of Connacht

For this entry I am presenting an example ensemble of early Irish garb. Clothing in early Ireland was regulated more based on rank and profession than by gender – here I demonstrate the garb of a higher ranked woman, a filidh bard in fact. I have used depictions from the Book of the Kells and the Cross of Muirdach to fill in where the archaeological record and legal codes do not, as linen does not survive particularly well over the years. Pictures associated with this document can be found in the accompanying Book of Pictures, with the relevant picture denoted by a section number and a letter indicating the order.

Laws of Ireland[[1]](#footnote-1)

The laws of Early Ireland, called the Brehon Laws, dictated quite strictly what people of various classes were allowed to wear, in terms of garments, materials, and colours. While we no longer have the full text of the Brehon Laws, due to the ravages of time, we have facsimiles of the first, second, and part of the third volumes of the 8th century Senchus Mór, the main compilation of these laws in written form. (2A) [[2]](#footnote-2) As a filidh bard, my persona’s clothes would be regulated by the laws of those in trained professions, considered quite high in status. My persona would be allowed full freedom of dress – a leine to ankle length, ionar jacket, woolen brat – all were legal for a bard of my station. However, a filidh bard is limited to five colours, instead of the six of higher ranking bards. Ollamh bards, the highest rank, were so greatly valued that they were allowed the same colours and accoutrements as kings! Different sources cite different colours as indicative of high rank and nobility, and there is no real consensus amongst the academics at this time. However all agree that brightly dyed or *gel* garments were worn by those of rank and status, which I emulate here. My 5 garb colours are blue (several shades), yellow (several shades), green, purple, and red.

Leine[[3]](#footnote-3)

The bottom layer is an Irish leine, the main garment worn by both upperclass men and women throughout the early period, from around 600-1200 CE. A ubiquitous linen garment worn with a belt about the waist and frequently covered with a pinned cloak, or brat, subtle differences in the style, decoration, and construction of the leine can be used to distinguish the evolution of the garment through the ages and the status of the wearer. Leines became more fitted over time, with deeper gores aiding in shaping. Longer leines, down to floor length, indicated higher rank, as did finer linen and more elaborate embroidery. This particular leine is ankle length, of a fairly fine cloth, with wool embroidery - not the garment of a top lord or lady, perhaps, but definitely someone of some means.

Materials (2B) : This garment is made using completely period materials, although they were all manufactured and dyed in a modern manner. The cloth is a middle weight blue linen, with an undyed linen structural thread and dyed wool embroidery thread for the decorations. In period, a higher class individual would have used silk or even precious metals for embroidery, however we have evidence of wool being used as well. I used wool embroidery thread myself for cost. Keeping in mind my station as a filidh bard, all the designs are based around 5 main colours, with white as a ‘freebie’ colour.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Pattern: As linen does not survive particularly well over the ages, no intact early period leines have been discovered to date, therefore I designed this garment with the assistance of designs on the 10th century Cross of Muirdach and the 9th century Book of the Kells, pictures of which can be seen in the Book of Pictures 2C and 2D. [[5]](#footnote-5) I used measurements of myself for the general dimensions, altering them to match the extant images and my existing leinte. To measure myself, I took a rope knotted at thumb-length intervals to get my general bust, underbust, waist, belly, and hip measurements, plus the length intervals between them and the height of the garment. I did similarly for the sleeves, measuring the width at the armpit, bicep, elbow, and wrist, and then the intervals.

My leine is designed to be ankle length on me, with sleeves going down to the wrist. The sleeves are neither voluminous nor skintight, similar to the image designs (2E). As well, the sleeves are a separate piece of fabric, as looms in period would not be wide enough to construct a garment from a single piece of cloth. As I am not particularly a fan of sleeves on my garments, this was the first time I had attempted making sleeves. I used a spare piece of light cotton cloth to make a pattern, trimming the piece to fit as I went, before assembling the final ones out of linen. As part of this I had to add gussets at the underarms which do not appear apparent in period garb, to fit my bust. I also found out at Regional A&S that I inadvertently used a modern style for the sleeve attachment, with the sleeve rounding up over the shoulder. Per my judges, a period sleeve attachment would have been more of a straight line at the seam instead. My drawings of this can be seen in 2H, however none of the extant drawings or images I found showed this particular attachment point. Gores, or triangular fabric inserts, were used to help shape the garment to the body, although at this early period gores would be slighter, not the voluminous things they would become in later time periods. Pattern pieces were traced with chalk then cut with scissors, the modern equivalents of period tools.

Stitches: There are three main stitches used in this leine. (2I, 2J) The first two are structural – a simple running stitch and a rolled hem stitch along each seam and hem, with the rolled hem stitches elongated on the ‘right’ side of the fabric to serve as a kind of decoration in and of themselves. This stitch combination has been found on extant linen garments at sites from the period in question, as well as the general region. This running stitch combined with the rolled hem has been used on every exposed seam and hem-length, to ensure the survivability of the final product. The decorative embroidery stitches are exclusively split stitches. [[6]](#footnote-6) I used the excellent cataloging work of Jennifer Carlson out of U Tulsa in determining what stitches to use – she has created a database of which stitches were found in which archaeological sites for which time periods, which proved invaluable to my research! These particular stitches were found in caps at a 9-11th C dig at Dublin, Ireland. While in period these stitches would have been put in using a bone or wood needle, I used mundane metal needles for the vast majority of the project myself.

Embroidery: The embroidery is similarly taken from a Book of the Kells design, from Folio page 1r. (2K, 2L) We do not have exact evidence on what patterns would be used, but the images on the Cross of Muriedach, the Book of the Kells, and written descriptions of garb such as in the Wooing of Becfhola or the Taine Bo Cualgne all indicate decorations of embroidery were standard for upper class garb. For the leine, I decided to do the embroidery in a rust-red, white, and yellow, well within the 5 colour limit (2M, 2N). Whereas embroidery in period probably would have been freehanded, or at most marked with chalk or coal, I used paper pattern pinned to the cloth as a template, slit to allow easier removal.

Ionar and Belt

Similar to the leine in construction but shorter in length, the ionar served as a jacket or overtunic of linen or wool. (3A) For the lower classes, the ionar was the only garment allowed them by law, but for higher classes, this could be layered on top of the leine.[[7]](#footnote-7) For a long time, academics thought that higher classes wouldn’t wear the ionar, but this has since been disputed.[[8]](#footnote-8) Indeed even in the Book of the Kells itself we see examples of ionar worn on top of leines, as in the case of the images of Mary, John, and others (3C-3F). For each of these examples, the person is wearing a leine of one colour, a brat of a second, but has a third layer showing as well, from the different coloured sleeves of Mary and John to the second necklines of the two unnamed figures.

My ionar is made with a middle weight rustic red linen, going down to just below my knees, but otherwise using the same basic pattern and stitching types as on the leine. The sleeves are also very slightly shorter, to show off the embroidery of the leine sleeve underneath as well as the secondary layer. The embroidery for this piece also comes from p1r, the same as on the leine, with a slight difference to the dot pattern and of course with different colours. The ionar is orange-gold (yellow), white, and blue. I wanted a pattern that would complement that of the leine without being a direct inverse mimic. (3E, 3F)

Belt:[[9]](#footnote-9) (3A) Over the ionar, and of course the leine under it, an Irish person in this period would also wear a belt, upon which they could hang a bag or pouch, an eating knife, a sword, etc. While accessories are not technically part of an SCA ensemble entry, I wanted to touch base on my belt in this ensemble. Belts of this period were frequently made of leather or decorated woven fabric, held closed with an early tongue-and-hole type buckle, and between 1-4 inches in width. (3G, 3H) I chose leather for my belt, three inches in width, and held closed with a simple clasp. (3I)

Brat

No proper Irish noble would be seen without her cloak, or brat, usually pinned at the shoulder with a metal, wood, or bone pennanular broach. (4A, 4B) The brat is made from a single piece of wool, rectangular in length, and frequently fringed or embroidered at the hem. Mine is made from a bright blue lightweight wool. Similar to the leine and ionar, I used a running stitch/rolled hem combination to secure the sides of the wool that were not already fringed when I acquired the cloth. I took the design for the embroidery for this brat from Folio page 32v[[10]](#footnote-10), the process of which can be seen at (4C-3I) for the 70 inches of embroidered cloak. For colours I went with red, purple, green, and yellow on the blue wool; with white again as a ‘freebie’ colour I just barely make my 5 colour limit.

Footwear[[11]](#footnote-11)

Shoes: (5A) Contrary to popular belief, shoes were worn by most for at least some occasions in this time period. They were still made of a single piece of leather at this time, with varying levels of complexity depending on rank. While the peasantry would wear shoes made from essentially a gathered oval of leather, those of higher class, such as my portrayed persona, would wear slightly fitted garments. (5B)

Called the Lucas Type 1 shoe, after the person who first described the shoe and the pattern, these shoes are made from a leather 2-3mm in thickness out of a single piece, sewn at the toe and the heel. (5C) While the pattern may look odd, it fits together nicely. The shoe would be stuffed with straw or hay for support and warmth, and frequently was tooled or decorated.

For my shoe, after measuring my foot for the correct dimensions, I used a graphing method to transfer and scale the design. I was leery of the odd-looking design, so first I made a mock-up in waxed canvas, and was quite pleased with the results. I then used my awl to transfer the pattern to my leather in period style, cutting the material with shears. (5D) I tooled the leather before sewing, using the tip of the awl and a plastic letter opener to depress the leather, the plastic in place of the horn that would have been used in period. Holes were made in the leather for sewing using the awl as well, sewing the shoe with a saddle type stitch with modern needles and artificial sinew. (5E) In period, this would be done with actual sinew and bone or wood needles. The shoes were finished with a beeswax rub on the outside and laces of leather cord run through holes in the sides. (5F)

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Inside the shoe, socks or stockings were worn in period for both warmth and comfort – I chose socks for my project as I overheat easily. (5G) Made of wool yarn, these socks have been made with naalbinding, an ancient yarnwork technique that predates knitting. These particular socks are based off of a pair found at a dig in Oseberg, making them contemporaneous to my persona’s period if not precisely Irish. (5H) We know that the Norse and the Irish had a large amount of contact both pre and during this time period[[12]](#footnote-12), and interactions around the Dublin region have shown the transmission of garb styles between the two cultures, therefore I view the Norse style sock a valid compromise for this ensemble, in light of lack of extant evidence of exact Irish socks.

Naalbinding is created by making a series of knots in the yarn, so the piece cannot be unraveled with just a missed stitch or a cut in the cloth.[[13]](#footnote-13) Naalbinding is traditionally done with a bone or wood needle, using the thumb as a gauge to ensure even stitches. As before, I used a metal needle in place of the wood or bone, and my own thumb as the gauge. (5I) I used blue wool for the main body of the socks, with red trim on the edges. While I had not originally planned on felting these pieces, the socks have felted themselves through wear and use, conforming to my own personal tread in a very comfortable manner!

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1. Binchy, 1978; Breatnach, 1987 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Brehon Law Academy, 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Netherton [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Binchy, 1978; Breatnach, 1987 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Cross of Muiredach, Book of the Kells, Dunlevy, [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Baker, Carlson 2002 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ginnell, 2010 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Barrett, 2006, Dunlevy 1989 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Barrett, 2006, Dunlevy 1989 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Netherton 2010 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Carlson, 1996, [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Neatherton, 2006 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Lizzie, 2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)